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ABSTRACT

Classroom research involves a number of techniques for careful and systematic observation of the process of teaching and learning. Its primary purpose is not to seek generalizations about teaching and learning, but to discover specific localized "truths" for a particular classroom. It involves classroom assessment, consisting of small-scale assessments conducted continuously in the classroom to determine what students are learning in that class. At California State University, Northridge, there has been an ongoing classroom research group with participants from many disciplines. Examples from courses in journalism, child development, and speech communication illustrate the kinds of techniques found useful in classroom assessment projects. However, faculty should ask only those questions they are prepared to answer, and realize that classroom research takes time. The classroom researcher should: (1) start small; (2) start with assessable goals; (3) get students actively involved; and (4) be flexible and willing to change. The most effective classroom assessment techniques are those that are limited, simple to analyze, and appropriate for the teacher and the subject matter. They provide valuable feedback for the teacher to use in enhancing the teaching/learning process. (A detailed description of a classroom assessment technique called "focused dialectical notes" is attached.) (SR)

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CLASSROOM RESEARCH: IF IT'S SO SIMPLE, HOW CAN IT BE ANY good?

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If It's So Simple, How Can It Be Any Good?Classroom Research in Communication

Most of us have had the experience of having finished reading a set of exams and asking ourselves, " Were these students in MY class? How could they have understood the material so differently from the way I taught it?" A common frustration for many of us is that we think the students are " getting it," when in fact they are confused, and by the time we find this out, the exams are graded and the semester is over. Our assumptions about what students know and how well we have " taught " are very often misguided. We are constantly shocked when we recognize this discrepancy. As teachers of communication, we may be well aware of the communication process and yet naively ignore an essential factor in communication -- feedback. Using Classroom Research is one way to incorporate this vital, but often overlooked element of communication in the classroom. The purpose of this paper is to briefly outline the process of Classroom Research and suggest how it might be used in the communication classroom.

What is Classroom Research?

Classroom Research involves a number of techniques for careful and systematic observation of the process of teaching and learning. According to Cross and Angelo, the purposes of classroom research are: 1. to provide feedback and information to classroom teachers about how students learn their particular subject matter; 2. to enhance the knowledge of the individual teacher in order to improve the effectiveness of her or his teaching;
3. to give insight and understanding rather than prediction and control. "Classroom Research is different in concept, procedures, and purpose from educational research. . . . The primary purpose of Classroom Research is to get feedback from students on what they are learning while the learning is in progress. It is not to seek generalizations about teaching and learning, but to answer the very specific question, What are *my* students learning in *my* classroom as a result of *my* instruction?" (K. Patricia Cross, "Teaching to

Improve Learning. Journal on Excellence in College Teaching I, 1990, p. 12) Classroom research actively engages the students in the learning process and establishes a dialogue about learning. It allows teachers to evaluate their own strategies and give voice to students. It differs from traditional social science educational research in purpose and method. The purpose of classroom research is to discover specific localized " truths" for a particular classroom, not generalizable " truths" for a larger population. The purpose of classroom research is to get feedback during the semester -- not at the end of the semester. Classroom Research establishes a dialogue with the students in order to improve their learning. Useful for any instructor, it is a practical method of inquiry that promotes open communication between teacher and students as they jointly reflect on the teaching/learning process.

Classroom Research involves classroom assessment. One may design a classroom research project by incorporating a number of classroom assessment techniques, but I have found that using classroom assessment techniques throughout the semester without any elaborate design, has helped me initiate and maintain dialogue with students. I frequently use classroom assessment techniques to find out what students have learned and how they are learning. Ultimately, I hope they develop a sense of responsibility for their own learning and that the classroom becomes a dynamic community of learners. By checking students' learning along the way, I can " self-correct." Once students realize that the teacher is seriously comitted to helping them, they begin to reflect on how best they learn and what questions they have.

Classroom assessment is a first step in classroom research. It consists of small scale assessments conducted continuously in college classrooms by discipline -based teachers to determine what students are learning in that class. Classroom assessment was founded on the premise that if teachers can monitor what students are learning, they can determine the effectiveness of their teaching and can modify their teaching accordingly. "A basic assumption underlying Classroom Research is that accurate and credible feedback about the impact of teaching on learning carries a built-in challenge to teachers to see if they can increase learning through experimentation with more effective teaching methods. The best way for teachers to get feedback that has high validity for them is to design the assessment measures themselves. In simplest

terms, the feedback loop in Classroom Research involves stating in assessable terms what students should be learning in the class, designing feedback measures to assess the extent to which they are learning those things, and then experimenting with ways to improve learning (Cross, p. 18).

Examples of Classroom Assessment Projects

At California State University, Northridge, we have had an ongoing Classroom Research group with participants from many disciplines. Several examples of their classroom assessment projects may help illustrate the kinds of techniques that have been found useful. One faculty member from the Journalism Department was concerned about students' frustration with understanding "legalese" until well into the semester when they were to be reading and understanding cases with relative ease. She assigned the first law case in the book as homework. The next class session, she distributed an ungraded questionnaire to see how much students understood about the case. She collected and analyzed them for common problems. Then she gave a lecture and handouts on " How To Read A Law Case, illustrated by her own notes on the case. She then asked them to write out three other questions . She answered the additional questions and repeated parts of the " How To Read A Case" lecture. She noted that the questions became more specific and class participation increased. Another examples is from the field of child development. A professor sought to improve the quality of advocacy letters produced by the students. She used several techniques including a freewrite on the definition of advocacy, what it means for children and families and one topic of individual interest where advocacy is needed. The freewrite method involves students being asked to write everything they can think of about a topic for a very limited time (1-2 minutes) without editing their thoughts. This was followed by class discussion and collaborative learning exercises. Students were asked to assess what they had gained from the discussions and what they had contributed. The faculty member was very pleased with the students responses and their resultant letters.

After introducing students to the rhetorical nature of social movements by lecture and discussion, I employed the " one minute paper" technique. I asked

class members to write the answers to the following questions. " What was the most important point you got from the lecture/discussion today? and " What is one question you still have?" I collected the anonymous papers and reviewed them before the next class. I discovered that most of the students understood the major points about social movements but that they still had difficulty with the concept of rhetoric. At the beginning of the next class, I spent time reviewing how the term " rhetoric" was being used and asked students to discuss its application to social movements. Before continuing on to other topics, I was more certain they understood the basic terms. I have had the experience of assuming students' knowledge of common terms and discovering that they do not understand. By allowing them to write questions anonymously, the instructor learns the questions of students who might hesitate to ask them in class.

Another classroom assessment technique is " Focused Dialectical Notes " (see attached).Students write Focused Dialectical Notes by directly responding to and questioning ideas and assertions within their assigned course readings. These dialogues, in the form of notes, can be used as a source of information on students' ways of reading and understanding course material. Students are asked to divide a few pieces of notepaper in half lengthwise and to take notes on a reading passage only on the left half of the divided paper. They should record reactions to the text, agreements, disagreements, questions, etc. They should think of their notes as a dialogue , a conversation with the text. The students should be told that the teacher will collect the notes and read through them but not grade them. The teacher will be able to identify how students are reading the text and at another class session continue the dialogue by having students reread the text and make notes on the right hand side of the paper. After this process, they are more confident in express their own "truth." The method has been helpful to me in teaching rhetorical analysis.

Caveats and Guidelines About Classroom Research

The experiences of those who engage in Classroom Research are overwhelmingly positive. Faculty report that classroom research is mutually beneficial to themselves and their students. There are, however, two related critical caveats that should be noted. 1. Ask only those questions you are

willing to answer. 2.Classroom research takes time! When devising questions or strategies seeking feedback, be certain that you are willing to address the responses. For example, if you are not willing to change your policy about quizzes or homework, do not ask students to suggest ways of changing them. Furthermore, if you ask students to respond in writing to a one-minute paper, for instance, you must acknowledge their responses, not necessarily individually, but as a group and demonstrate you consider the feedback valid. Of course, responding to the assessment techniques takes time. If you discover through feedback that most of the class is confused about the material, it is incumbent upon you to devise methods for clarification, even if it means repeating parts of a lecture, assigning different reading or devising new approaches of teaching.

The following guidelines may be helpful in designing successful classroom assessment projects: 1. Start with assessable goals; seek to answer questions that can be answered in your class; 2. Focus on alterable variables (for example, you may not be able to change the time of the class); 3. Build-in success; you may very well reaffirm the teaching methods you are currently using; 4. start small; faculty get frustrated in classroom assessment when they try to assess the learning for the entire course; 5. get students actively involved; at first they will not know what they are doing, but as they receive feedback from you, they will become engaged in the process; 6. set limits on time and effort you'll invest; there is only so much you can do in a semester; 7. be flexible and willing to change; 8. work with other teachers who share your interest; the collegiality factor is one of the most positive aspects of classroom research; 9. remember that students must first learn to give useful feedback and then must practice doing so; 10. enjoy experimentation and risk-taking, not just success.

Conclusion

Simplicity is a major emphasis throughout classroom assessment. The most effective classroom assessment techniques are those that are limited, simple to analyze, and appropriate for the teacher and the subject matter. They provide valuable feedback for the teacher to use in enhancing the teaching/learning process. Faculty who are willing to try classroom assessment techniques will recognize not only that students have something important to communicate about their own learning, but that as instructors they can help them do so.

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From Classroom Assessment Techniques ed. by K. Patricia Cross and Tom Angelo; NCRIPTL 1988

Classroom Assessment Technique 8
FOCUSED DIALECTICAL NOTES

EASE-OF-USE RATING: IV

■ **DESCRIPTION:**
Students write Focused Dialectical Notes by directly responding to and questioning ideas and assertions within their assigned course readings. These dialogs, in the form of notes, can be used as a source of information on students' ways of reading and understanding course material.

■ **PURPOSE:**
This technique provides detailed feedback on how students analyze and respond to academic texts they are reading. By analyzing this information, the teacher can locate general problems in the students' analytic reading strategies as well as specific misunderstandings or problems with the content of the text.

■ **SUGGESTIONS FOR USE:**
This device is particularly useful for courses in fields where close study of texts is critical, fields such as history, philosophy, political science, literature, ethnic studies, women's studies, and law. The feedback can be structured in advance through the use of focused questions or this can be left to each student's judgment. To get the most useful feedback from Focused Dialectical Notes, the teacher may have to administer it more than once before students become adept at it.

■ **EXAMPLE:**
In a course on the theory and practice of bilingual education, the teacher assigns two well-written and highly opinionated essays—one strongly "for" bilingual education, the other just as strongly "against." In the margins of both essays, the paragraphs are numbered for easy reference. The teacher directs the students to read both essays quickly, then to go back and read each more carefully, writing Focused Dialectical Notes on each. The students use the paragraph numbers in their notes to identify those paragraphs to which they are responding.

The teacher collects the notes and skims through them, noting the paragraphs that consistently get the longest and strongest responses. He also makes notes on how the students are responding to what he identifies as the main arguments in the essays. He notes that the students often respond emotionally to key assertions but usually fail to go on to strengthen their comments with explanations, examples, or arguments. They also seem to ignore important arguments that they disagree with, rather than analyzing them and taking issue. More importantly, the students have great difficulty analyzing their own responses to the text. He decides to address these issues in class by demonstrating his Focused Dialectical Notes on the same text. He later repeats the process, noting some improvement in the second set of notes.

■ **PROCEDURE:**
1. Select an important passage from the course readings—one that is somewhat difficult but also relatively short and self-contained.

2. Ask students to divide a few pieces of notepaper in half lengthwise by drawing a line from top to bottom.
3. Direct them to take notes on the reading passage only on the left half of the divided notepaper. Ask the students to write down their reactions to the text—agreements, disagreements, questions, and the like. Suggest that they think of their notes as a dialog—a conversation with the text. Let the students know before they start that you will collect the notes and read through them but not grade them.
4. Direct them to return to the passage and their notes after a day or so, and then read through their notes with the passage nearby for reference. They will then write responses on the right side of the notepaper to their reading notes on the left side. Once again, encourage them to carry on a dialog with their own notes.

■ ANALYZING THE DATA YOU COLLECT

Once you have gone through the process of making your own Focused Dialectical Notes on a text, you can easily identify what you consider to be the key points. Check the left side of the students' notes to see how many of your key points get substantial responses in their notes. Look also for what they focus on that you did not. Then analyze the right side—their responses to their own text notes. Try to categorize the responses that students made to themselves, and then count the instances of each type of response. Look for changes in positions, reinforcements, qualifications, new insights, and the like.

■ IDEAS FOR EXTENDING AND ADAPTING:

- Ask students to take Focused Dialectical Notes on a lecture, rather than a reading passage. Make an audio- or videotape of the lecture for those students who need or wish to review it.
- Ask students to trade papers and to write comments on each other's notes.
- Have students turn their second-generation notes into an essay reacting to the passage.

■ PROS:

- This technique gives the teacher something akin to a reading protocol, a record of students' careful reading and reactions to a text. This can help the teacher understand how students read.
- It provides a contextualized sample of the students' skills at reasoning with themselves about a text, to think analytically about what they're reading.
- It promotes self-reflective learning as it provides feedback.

■ CONS:

- There is some danger that students will censor themselves or will try to write what they think the teacher wants to read, rather than writing candid, personal responses.
- Students often find this type of explicit response to reading unfamiliar and difficult, and often do rather poorly at first. This can be dispiriting to the teacher and the students.

■ **CAVEATS:**

This device requires skills that may be underdeveloped in many students. For this reason, it is important not to confuse a student's lack of skill in responding to a text and to his or her own comments with a lack of ability to think analytically. Your students may need to be trained in this reading and study technique, or others, before you can productively assess their analytic skills.

■ **REFERENCES:**

This technique is adapted from a teaching technique introduced to one of the authors by Dr. Dixie Goswami, a well-known writing teacher and researcher, in classes she taught at the University of Massachusetts at Boston during the 1984-1985 academic year.

NOTES